



## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *How to Increase Homelessness*

### Author: Joel John Roberts

Joel John Roberts is the CEO of PATH Partners and People Assisting The Homeless. He is the author of *How To Increase Homelessness* published by Loyal Publishing. He is the former chair of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority Advisory Board, board member of the Westside Shelter and Hunger Coalition, member of the Bring L.A. Home Blue Ribbon panel, member of the L.A. County Sheriff's Caucus for the Homeless, panelist for the California Governor's Homeless Summit, member of the City of Long Beach Homeless Working Group, board member of the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, and a Zero Divide fellow at the Community Technology Foundation of California.

### Artical:

The homeless get counted; A new national survey is expected to reveal that efforts to end chronic homelessness in the US by 2011 are behind schedule.

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Byline: Patrik Jonsson Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

GARNER, N.C.—Perhaps not with pride, but with a certain dignity, Dane Blythe crawled out of his tent in late January and got counted in the second national count of the chronically homeless.

After 31 years living in the outdoors, Mr. Blythe, a ditch digger, is the picture of America's seemingly intractable homeless problem. Sometimes, he says, he questions his vagabond lifestyle. Other times he values its freedom.

"I'm like anybody else," he said during an interview last week.

In rickety encampments from Los Angeles to here in Garner, N.C., an estimated 800,000 homeless hunker on the fringes of cities and towns, often struggling with poverty, mental illness, or addiction. This year's count, judging from early indications, will show that a government-led race to end chronic homelessness by 2011 is far off the pace.

Despite criticisms of its accuracy and methodology, the US-mandated National Point-in-Time Survey is itself emblematic of innovative new efforts to bring America's most disaffected, disfranchised population in from the cold. To people like Blythe, the very fact that he has been seen and counted carries a measure of hope.

"The good part of the [snapshot survey] is that it's created a sense of movement, and both the private- and public-sector people are starting to say, 'Yeah, we need to do something,' " says Joel John Roberts, executive director of People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) in Los Angeles and author of the satire *How to Increase Homelessness*.

In more than 3,800 communities from Birmingham, Ala., to Los Angeles, volunteers in January peeked into culverts, looked under bridges, and trudged through the woods to find vagabond encampments and count the homeless. Because many homeless people try hard to keep a low profile, survey organizers sometimes resorted to the controversial practice of hiring homeless people as guides for \$10 an hour. The task was made more difficult by safety rules that prohibit volunteers from entering private property or ducking down dark alleys.



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To be included in the federal count, a person must be homeless for a year or more, or have been homeless at least four times in the past three years.

Though the national count won't be released until 2008, officials in Wichita, Kan., reported the number of homeless had dropped from 589 last January to 526, though they couldn't cite why. Around Raleigh, N.C., the tally rose a bit, from 1,726 to 1,820. The survey showed that 1,300 children were homeless on one January day in Florida's Escambia and Santa Rosa counties.

The survey is designed in part to quantify the problem and to set base lines for communities, which must take part to qualify for federal funds for the homeless. But the count also humanizes those who live outside, experts say, and helps to galvanize communities struggling to create or maintain political will to do something about homelessness.

The survey helps "people understand that homelessness isn't only a city problem," says Diane Randall of the Partnership for Strong Communities in Hartford, Conn., which promotes supportive housing for the state's homeless population.

Relying on shelters, soup kitchens, and charitable groups to fight homelessness has been a failure, however well-intended, says Phil Mangano, director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness in Washington, made up of the chiefs of 24 federal agencies. The homeless census can be seen as part of a federal shift away from "three hots and a cot" - an approach that has had only a marginal impact on reducing the number of homeless people.

"We had long hoped that the moral and spiritual and human and cultural...responsibilities that we felt toward people literally on the streets would drive political will necessary" to end homelessness, says Mr. Mangano. "But not in one place in our country did that happen."

So far, the surveys have helped the Interagency Council to bring mayors, city councilors, and county commissioners to the table, a process that has led to 293 local 10-year plans to end homelessness. Private-sector efforts are under way, too, including plans by a Florida architect to build a 5,500-bed homeless "village" near Orlando.

But the greatest successes are actual construction or conversion of apartments into "supportive housing" - in effect, a form of rent control for the homeless, with health and mental services available on site. Some 50,000 such units now house formerly homeless people in cities like New York; Norfolk, Va.; Hartford, Conn.; San Francisco, and San Diego, according to the Interagency Council.

A 2005 study by the University of California at San Diego, for the city of San Diego, found that the average street person in California costs communities between \$40,000 and \$150,000 a year in public services ranging from healthcare to police.

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## Spotlight on: *How to Increase Homelessness*

### LAist Interview with Joel John Roberts

February 13, 2006

As Valentine's Day approaches, what better way to acknowledge the holiday than highlighting the work of an Angeleno like homeless advocate, Joel John Roberts, who embodies the tenet "love thy neighbor"? Joel has lead the homeless advocacy organization PATH (People Assisting The Homeless) for ten years and maintains the LA Homeless Blog, which includes links to articles about the homeless in Los Angeles and comments about current events such as the fate of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority or acts of celebrity benevolence like George Clooney giving a \$100 to a homeless man on the streets of London. Joel is also the author of the satirical book *How to Increase Homelessness*.

#### Age and Occupation?

I have been the CEO of PATH (People Assisting The Homeless) for the last ten years. I'm 44 years old.

#### How long have you lived in Los Angeles, and which neighborhood do you live in?

I grew up in Long Beach since I was two years old. I now live in Santa Monica with my family.

#### Why do you live in Los Angeles?

I am here because L.A. needs more social entrepreneurs who are passionately pursuing innovative and strategic social programs that are changing people's lives, and transforming our community.

#### How did you become an advocate for homeless people?

When I was an infant, I lived in an orphanage in an Asian city and was adopted by a family in Long Beach. They gave me the "tools" to succeed in life—education, love, faith, hope...It is now my turn to "pay forward" to a world that took care of me. These same "tools" that I received years ago are now offered to people in Los Angeles who are homeless and hurting (through the agency I run.) From being homeless to serving the homeless. It's a full circle.

#### Do you agree with the current count of the number of homeless people in Los Angeles County?

Why is an accurate count necessary? As I have shared with numerous media outlets that have asked me this same question, "The count is in the 'ballpark.'" Counting the homeless is crucial. How can we solve a problem if we don't know the extent of the crisis?

#### Do you think it's possible to eradicate homelessness in LA? How?

Decades ago, homelessness was practically nonexistent, except for a small pocket of homelessness in downtown L.A. Can we return to these days? Yes! (The real question is whether our community really has the will to do it...)

#### What do you think of the renewed interest in the homeless population in downtown LA, sparked by Steve Lopez's series in the Los Angeles Times and renewed police activity?

Twenty years ago, L.A. also embraced this same interest in solving homelessness. Many of today's homeless agencies were born in the 1980s because of this attention. But interest diminished, and the homeless population soared. This new interest is a window of opportunity for us to really solve the problem. If we don't take advantage of this good will, twenty years from now we might still be in the same place, or worse...



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### Interview: (continued)

#### Why do you keep an LA Homeless blog?

The world needs to know that Los Angeles—the “homeless capital of America”—has model homeless programs, innovative approaches to the problem, and is developing a synergy among business, political, community, and social service leaders to tackle this social crisis. If we can solve homelessness in L.A., we can solve it any where in America.

#### What surprises you about Los Angeles?

That L.A. community leaders, decades ago, lacked the vision to build a subway to the beach, to develop enough housing that would be affordable to the average worker, and to design a social system of care for the homeless that would have ended homelessness.

#### What's your preferred mode of transportation?

My car—It's the one place that I can be alone.

#### How often do you ride the MTA subway or light rail?

When I have meetings in downtown Los Angeles.

#### What's your favorite movie(s) or TV show(s) that are based in LA?

The TV show: Alias. Because when the show pretends to be in Prague, London, or Hong Kong...they are really filming in L.A.—in a store or restaurant that I might have just been in that day.

#### Best LA-themed book(s)?

My own book, How To Increase Homelessness, published last year. It is a tongue-in-cheek perspective on the absurdity of homelessness in America—and in Los Angeles.

#### Share your best celebrity sighting experience.

Tyne Daly...she was up front at one of our luncheons, when she took her shoes off, and auctioned them off to the highest bidder. (Proceeds went to PATH. The shoes were what she wore in a show that won a Tony award.)

#### In your opinion, what's the best alternate route to the 405?

Stay home and work via telecommunications.

#### What's the best place to walk in LA?

To see a different perspective of our city...walk Skid Row. To see the best sunsets in the world...walk Santa Monica Pier. To see interesting L.A. people...walk Melrose Avenue.

#### It's 9:30 pm on Thursday. Where are you coming from and where are you going?

I'm usually at home doing work on my laptop, or watching a video on my iPod.

#### If you could live in LA during any era, when would it be?

Before the 1960s, when there were few homeless.

#### What's your beach of choice?

My hometown—Santa Monica beach (bacteria and all.)





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What is the “center” of LA to you?

Homeless service centers—like the PATH Mall—where the poor and homeless of Los Angeles go for help. They represent all walks of L.A. life—from an out-of-work screenwriter, a veteran of Iraq war, a school teacher who ran away from an abusive home, an elderly woman with no social security, to a Ph.D.-holding alcoholic.

What is the “center” of LA to you if you have a child?

The beach.

Is there an “LA” child personality?

Being racially color-blind. (Kids are not born with prejudice, they are taught it.) In a city where hundreds of languages are spoken, we are forced to either accept those who look and talk differently, or move on.

If you were forced to live in a neighboring county, which would you choose? Ventura County is a wussy answer. Anywhere near a beach.

If you could live in any neighborhood or specific house in LA, where/which would you choose?

I would like to rotate from house to house—from the Mayor’s house, to a County Board of Supervisor’s house, to the top philanthropists, top business executives, top entertainers, to top faith leaders—so I could convince each of L.A.’s movers and shakers that enough is enough...let’s end homelessness now!

Los Angeles is often stereotyped as a hard place to find personal connections and make friends. Do you agree with that assessment? Do you find it challenging to make new friends here?

Just join a church, synagogue, weight watchers, gym, club, nonprofit board, or go on myspace.com...

What is the city’s greatest secret?

That we allow thousands of homeless families and adults to sleep in our parks, under bridges, along our freeways, on the beaches, in the hills, and behind local trash dumpsters. (Although, lately, the secret has been exposed.)

Drinking, driving. They mix poorly, and yet they’re inexorably linked. How do you handle this conflict?

Make sure to drive with a non-drinker.

Describe your favorite LA dining experience.

Brunch at Rockenwagner, lunch at Ciudad, and dinner at The Lobster. (But not all in one day.)

What do you have to say to East Coast supremacists?

Los Angeles—our people, activities, trends, and vision—represents the future of America.

Do you find the threat of earthquakes preferable to the threat of hurricanes and long winters?

I prefer none of the above.

Where do you want to be when the Big One hits?

Home with my family.